

THE INUNDATION OF KELANIYA: MYTH AND MISCONCEPTION

Until the tsunami of December last hit Sri Lanka, bringing death and destruction over three-fifths of the coastline, people had lived in the smug belief that, no matter natural catastrophes elsewhere in the world, this island, by the grace of the guardian gods, was secure from such. No violent earthquakes, no volcanoes spewing ash and lava over the country, no raging forest-fires, no cyclones and tidal-waves.

So much so that when historians of the past ran up against evidence of one such in the *Mahavamsa* and allied chronicles—the inundation of the kingdom of Kelaniya during the reign of King Kelanitissa (in consequence of which there took place the marriage of his daughter, Viharadevi, to King Kavantissa of Ruhuna Mahagama) they either by-passed the anecdote altogether, as does Senerat Paranavitana in *The University of Ceylon History of Ceylon* (or more recently, K.M. de Silva and W.I. Siriweera), or, if they touched upon it, did so without comment or commitment.

On the other hand, the few who suspected that what we had here was a historical fact of an alliance by marriage between two royal households but romanticized by myth, were however unable to trace the mythic elements thereof to any of the Jatakas or other literature of India or Sri Lanka as they had in the case of the Vijaya legend and the Ummadacitta-Pandukabhaya stories, and so remained undecided upon the matter of the inundation as well.

How much fuller the tradition was on this inundation when the *Mahavamsa* (more justly culpable of what it does not disclose than of what it does) brought in the episode involving it to explain the parentage of Dutugemunu, we shall never know, but for us who have now experienced what havoc such a thing can cause, the single matter-of-fact statement of the chronicler is, to say the least, amazing. I give here Wilhelm Geiger's translation of the relevant passages (*Mhv.* XXII.13-22) for the benefit of those who may not readily recall what it said.

Now in Kalyani the ruler was the king named Tissa. His younger brother named Ayya-Uttiya, who had roused the wrath (of Tissa) in that he was the guilty lover of the queen, fled thence from fear and took up his abode elsewhere. The district was named after him. He sent a man wearing the disguise of a bhikkhu, with a secret letter to the queen. This man went thither, took his stand at the king's door and entered the king's house with an arahant who always used to take his meal at the palace, unnoticed by the therā. When he had eaten in company with the therā, as the king was going, he let the letter fall to the ground when the queen was looking.

The king turned at this (rustling) sound, and when he looked down and discovered the written message he raged, unthinking, against the therā, and in his fury he caused the therā and the man to be slain and thrown into the sea. Wroth at this the sea-gods made the sea overflow the land; but the king with all speed caused his pious and beautiful daughter named Devi to be placed in a golden vessel whereon was written “a king’s daughter”, and to be launched upon that same sea. When she had landed near to (the) Lanka (vihara) the king Kakavanna consecrated her as queen. Therefore she received the epithet Vihara.

In an article published several years ago in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*¹ I showed that the fabric of this romantic episode was constituted of what appeared to be three separate events, all of which could have been historical, interwoven by a fourth—the Killing of the Holy Therā, which could also have been a true happening. The three events were (a) the Ayya-Uttiya Intrigue (b) the Marriage of Viharadevi to King Kavantissa, and lastly (c) the Inundation of Kelaniya.

In a separate article, and sequel to my study of the Ummadacitta-Pandukabhaya story,² I once again treated this anecdote, this time to show that the elements of its mythic formulation, which had so far not been traced to any earlier literature, partially emulated the motifs of two well-known Greek myths—the myth of Andromeda in the sacrifice of the princess to assuage the anger of the sea-gods, and the myth of Danae of her vessel drifting to a distant land, where she is pulled ashore by fishermen and marries the king—with, subsequently, her son turning out to be a great hero who recovers a lost kingdom. Both these myths belong to the saga of the same Greek hero, Perseus, and could well have been popular in North-west India following Alexander and the Greek settlement there and thus influenced the tradition of the early kings of Sri Lanka, which was still not free of the mythistorical.

My review of the evidence of the inundation on those occasions and in a subsequent book which brought this research together³ was, even if perhaps more detailed than any before, at best incidental to what I was then interested in. This was

¹ “King Kelanitissa’s Crime” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Sri Lanka)* vol. XXXII (1987-8) p. 91–116.

² “The Princess in the Boat” *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*. vol. X (1983) p. 57-86. On the Ummadacitta–Pandukabhaya story, see “Of Perseus and Pandukabhaya” *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*. vol. IX (1983) pp.34– 66.

³ *Mahavamsa Studies: Greek Myth in the Ancient Tradition*. Colombo (2004) ch.V p.115–72.

the probability and extent to which these anecdotes appear to have drawn upon the exotic mythology. Even so, I was of the opinion that the inundation of Kelaniya itself was a real enough happening and that, far from being something drawn in with the rest of the mythic material, was what had in fact prompted the author of the local tradition to co-opt those other features from the exotic mythology which made up his own story. As I then wrote:⁴

This seems to have been a real enough catastrophe with all the ancient chroniclers, though the extent of the inundation and the damage it caused is not calculable

and

However, there can be no doubt that what we are here confronted with is evidence of a huge tidal-wave caused by a submarine disturbance or a depression, the intensity of which the island has never again experienced.

No one reading the two Greek myths together (of which the relevant portions are italicized by me) and substituting Danae and her experience for that of Andromeda, would fail to see the source of inspiration of our *Mahavamsa* story of Viharadevi here. They are as follows:

1. *Cassiopeia, wife of King Cepheus of Ethiopia, offended the Nereids (sea-nymphs) by claiming to be better than them all. Angered by this the deities got Poseidon, lord of the sea, to send a flood (and a sea-monster) to invade the land. But the god Ammon, having predicted deliverance from the inundation if the king sacrificed his daughter, Andromeda, to the sea-monster, Cepheus was compelled by the people to do so, chaining her to a crag for the sea to take her and assuage the anger of the nymphs.*

Andromeda's rescue was effected by the hero, Perseus. Flying past the place on magic sandals and seeing her plight, he slew the sea-monster and carried her off to safety. But the mode of sacrifice of Viharadevi and her being pulled to shore elsewhere where the king marries her recalls rather that of Danae, the first part of whose myth had already been exploited in the local tradition for the story of Ummadacitta.

2. Acrisius, king of Argos had a daughter, Danae, of whom it was prophesied that if a son were born to her, he would kill Acrisius. So Acrisius shut her in a brazen tower and set guards to protect her. Yet even

⁴ *op. cit.* p.132. "King Kelanitissa's Crime" p.103.

so her uncle, Proteus—or as some say, Zeus, coming down to her through the roof as a shower of gold—made her pregnant. So when the child (Perseus) was born, *Acrisius put mother and child in a chest and floated them on the sea. The waves, however, instead of drowning them as intended, carried mother and child to Seriphos, where the chest was pulled ashore by a fisherman, Dictys, who took them to his brother Polydectes, the king, who married Danae.*

As for the prophesy, it was to see fulfilment when Perseus, grown up and throwing a discus at an athletic contest, hit his grandfather on his foot (or head) and killed him. Afterwards, we are told that he left Argos to his cousin and took over the rule of Tiryns, the kingdom being rightly due to him.

Evidently then the adventure of Viharadevi, in its first half derives from the Andromeda myth, but thereafter rounds off with emulating the myth of Danae. The hero son born of this destiny, the Perseus of the Greek saga, is first Pandukabhaya, then Dutugemunu.

My concern in this review is, however, neither with dealing with the parallelisms beyond this, nor with arguing further the likelihood of these as the source of the Viharadevi story. Instead, now that the recent tsunami has given hard evidence of the plausibility of the inundation of Kelaniya, I take this opportunity to make comment on some radical views that have been expressed about and around it as a postscript of sorts to my earlier discussions.

By far the most drastic of these is the opinion (expressed recently in the newspapers,⁵ and notwithstanding the evidence of such possibility) which casts as much doubt on the historicity of the *Mahavamsa's* reference to the inundation of Kelaniya as on the Viharadevi anecdote associated with it. The writer's belief is that it is no more than the memory of a far more ancient, indeed a prehistoric happening which affected not just the Indian Ocean but all the oceans of the world. As he observes,

Tsunamis are devastating high waves that crash on the shore and withdraw into the sea or spend out on the land within a short distance and in a short time. No tsunami has lasted for more than three hours.

On the other hand, he writes, “according to our learned men, the waters that flooded Kelaniya about 150 B.C. are still there after 2300 years”.

⁵ K. S. Palihakkara “Sea Flooded the Land when Kavantissa was King” *The Sunday Leader* (March 13, 2005) p. 38.

They theorized that the sea-coast, which was seven miles [sic] away from Kelaniya is now reduced to four, thus leaving the island inundated up to three miles away by the ancient tidal wave.

This then, in his opinion, is no other than a reference to the rising of the sea-level thousands of years ago, the geographical basis of which is the melting of the ice following the Ice Age, which in that time also resulted in reducing the land bridge (which in mythology Hanuman used to encounter Ravana) to a series of islands. The *Mahavamsa*, he thinks, to some extent concedes this when it speaks only of the in-rush of the water with no mention of its withdrawal.

If the *Mahavamsa* had then tried to pass off the memory of a prehistoric swelling of the ocean as a tidal wave of the second century B.C., it is as culpable of prevarication as it would have been if it imported the inundation as well from the Andromeda myth with all the rest of the mythology we have shown. It is true that the *Mahavamsa* mentions only the in-rush of the sea in connection with the story, but it certainly assumes a termination of the action of the deities with the sacrifice of the maiden, if that was not to have been a cruel deception on their part.

The positive evidence used to discredit the notion of a tidal-wave (i.e. given as of learned men) is, I believe, the observation of the authors of the *Saddharmalankaraya* (*ekala Kelaniyata muhuda sath gauvaka*) and *Rajavaliya* (*ekala mūda Kelaniyata sath gauvak pamanaya denagatha yuthui*) is that the sea was not as now, but seven guavas distant from the city and that when the deities stopped the inundation (*Saddh. ekalhi devatavo muhuda uthpāthitha nokalaha*) there was no recession of the waters as with a tsunami but that a huge strip of land had become sea.

There are others who, on the other hand, accept the evidence we have from these later chronicles, not to argue that the inundation of Kelaniya was no tsunami but that the Kelaniya concerned is not the Kelaniya we know, usually identifying it with the region in the south-east of the island, where a fragmentary inscription in Brahmi has been found at an ancient site bearing the name “Kalanika Tisa”. Which, if so, would entail a shift of the scenario of our Viharadevi story, with all the attendant issues, to this place while leaving the geography of the Kelaniya we know undisturbed. This Kalanika Tisa Paranavitana took to be none other than Viharadevi’s father but construed the evidence of this inscription to be no more than that he was *connected with the rulers of that part of the country*.

On the other hand, one writer,⁶ somehow reading “Kalanika” to be a kingdom called “Kalyani Kanika” and locating it in the south-east, just south of

⁶ A. Denis N. Fernando, “Tsunamis, Earthquakes, their Intensity and Periodicity of Occurrence”. *The Island* (30 March 2005) p. 8 f.

Arugam Bay, takes it to be no other than that kingdom of King Kelanitissa which was overrun by the ocean. (I give the writer's words here as I find them, perhaps somewhat garbled in the printing).

History records that in the century B.C. in the Eastern Seaboard in Kalyani Kanika in the time of King Kelanitissa Tsunami occurred inundating that several townships had been destroyed and is recorded in the *Mahavamsa*.

He then, perhaps accepting the evidence of the later chronicles that a great extent of coast was permanently submerged, adds that "the location of Kalyani Kanika has been established using scientific evidence including coastal hydraulics, sea currents and its location determined in the eastern southern seaboard."

Now, not only does the *Mahavamsa* not say what is imputed to it here, but if the Kelaniya concerned was not the same as that which was made famous by the Buddha's visit (which also happens to be the only earlier reference in the chronicle to a place of that name), it is strange that that chronicle—and indeed any of the later ones—failed to make a distinction between this Kelaniya and that other so as to avoid ambiguity. The writer neither shows how the scientific evidence he speaks of established that this was Kelaniya, and the Kelaniya of our story, and no historian I know of has accepted it to be such. Also, there is not the foggiest idea where the city itself was then located so as to help relate the relative distances between sea and city before and after the event, as people are prompt to show with respect to the Kelaniya with which we are more familiar. Besides, granted this kingdom was where the writer claims it to have been, would it not have come within the territory held by the garrisons of Elara until freed by the campaign of Dutugemunu?⁷

What historians would find most stunning is the writer's observation that when Viharadevi (as he claims) was set afloat from Kalyani Kanika (and thus drifting west rather than south-east), was picked up at Kirinde and married King Kavantissa "a new dynasty of mixed parentage was established between the Naga dynasty [and] the Greek Bachies". Admittedly he is falling back on the so-called map of Ptolemy, boldly identifying the projection at its south-east (labelled *Cetaeu promont*) as Kirinde and the *Bachies civitas* (State of Bachies) with a community of *Greek Bachies* (Bacchics?) settled there, of whom then he sees Kavantissa as the

⁷ According to the coast contour map provided with this article (Map 3) Kelanitissa's kingdom is in Panama, i.e. north-east of Kavantissa's, but the famed ruins associated with this region are a *magul-mahavihara* and a *mūdu-mahavihara*, both of which would, even as an alternate site for our story, be more appropriate with Kavantissa's kingdom. Besides, if the contours show one thing more than another, it is that it was the latter's territory that appears to have been swallowed by the sea than Kelanitissa's!

king. (Of how King Kelanitissa's family claimed Naga descent I have less concern here).

If then the Kelaniya of our story is no different from the place we know of as Kelaniya in our day and age and there had occurred a reduction of the distance between city and sea at some time, the city was not the cause. It stood firm where it was from very ancient times, marked by the cetiya which commemorated the Buddha's visit; afterwards we hear of an image-house (*pilimage*) with an image in the *Selalihini Sandesaya* as marking the spot where the thera was boiled in oil, while the Kelani Vihara Inscription of Dharmaparakramabahu IX (1491-1513) evidences the existence of a "House of the Oil Cauldron" (*thel katārageya*), which must have been there up until the time the Portuguese sacked the place.

Thus the phenomenon of a reduction in the distance of the city from the sea, if it did happen, must be attributed, if not to a rise in the water level, to a subsidence of a huge strip of coastline, the transgression of the sea submerging, according to the *Saddharmalankaraya*, all the islands (?) except 13, besides 3500 ports, tanks, anicuts, fields etc; according to the *Rajavaliya*, also one lakh of harbours and 970 fishing villages and divers' villages.⁸ In other words, much of the seaboard known to us today as lying on either side of the highways to Galle and Puttalam, including the area of the Colombo harbour, would in the time of King Kelanitissa have been deep inland.

Taking a gauva at the lower estimate of 2 miles, these late chronicles want us to believe that the sea on that occasion ran as much as 12 miles into the land (i.e. *Saddh. ein gauvak thabā siyallama vasāgena*). Some manuscripts of the *Rajavaliya* read that the waters then covered eleven (regions?) of the island, some even reading a fantastic eleven-twelfths of the island as a whole!⁹

What we have here must then be a very late tradition that is inclined to sensation rather than the preservation of fact. Just two centuries earlier the *Sinhala Thupavamsa* knew nothing of these statistics, or if it did, thought it safe to reiterate more or less the general observation that we found in the *Mahavamsa* that the sea then merely inundated the land.

Turning to the question of that event's epicentre, the latter writer, who argues for King Kelanitissa's kingdom as being in the south-east of the island, like

⁸ These are highly dubious figures, moreso for just a part of the island – and of twenty two centuries ago. Besides, they fail to include the most important piece of information: the number of *people* the inundation killed.

⁹ The mss. have *lankāvata adutthu* and the variants *desin*, *desen*, *dēsen*, *dēsevalin* and *dolahen*, *dolahayen*, *dolasen* followed by *ekolosak muhudata gilī giyāha*. See A.V. Suraweera *Rajavaliya* Colombo (1976) p.170 n.7.

others of his ilk, must suppose an epicentre in the direction, perhaps even location, of the one that gave us our December tsunami.

Such a tsunami would then have obliged him to agree, not only that it devastated King Kelanitissa's kingdom but also that of King Kavantissa (not to mention all of that coastline that is shown shaded in red in map after map in recent newspapers as having been afflicted in the last), and far from being in a position to rescue his neighbour's daughter and hold wedding festivities, that King Kavantissa would have been hard put to rehabilitate his own devastated people. Besides, with just these two plottings, I am surprised how our correspondent was in a position to assert that "Statistically the return period of such an event is of the order of 2200 years," when (as I am also assured by the well-known Sri Lankan geologist, Dr. Kapila Dahanayaka),¹⁰ depending on the circumstances a similar or far worse calamity could occur *at any time now or in the future*.

If however, as we suppose, the Kelaniya of that second century B.C. inundation was no different from the Kelaniya we know, the epicentre must have been somewhere to the west, not east, of the island and so, *affected that very strip of coast that was spared the brunt of the recent onslaught*. Neither King Kavantissa nor Elara claimed responsibility for it so as to float their kith and kin on the waves as did King Kelanitissa—which must mean that their kingdoms did not experience it as badly, the former perhaps due to the obtrusion of the land at the south west of the island, the latter thanks to the shielding it received from the tip of South India. More than this, being no geologist, I dare not suggest, except perhaps that in the circumstances South India must have suffered, also the Maldives, while the deep penetration of the waters—even aided by what geographers like to call the "Lower Flood Plain" argues for that submarine thrust having originated relatively close to the island.

As significant as the violence of the tidal wave is the duration its flooding persisted without withdrawal—upon which, for instance, we saw our first correspondent argue that what the *Mahavamsa* referred to was no tsunami at all. Evidence of the story suggests it did not come in and immediately go back, as did last December's. It did so only after King Kelanitissa launched Viharadevi on the water (*Saddh. ekala devatavo muhuda uthpathitha nokalaha*) and for this he surely took time, first to appreciate that the water was not about to recede, then to consult his soothsayers,¹¹ thereupon prepare victim and vessel according to their advice and

¹⁰ Senior Professor, of Geology, University of Peradeniya, in a discussion which he had with me during the writing of this article.

¹¹ All the chronicles imply that this terrible idea was the king's own. It is more likely that (as Mary Musaeus-Higgins *Stories from the History of Ceylon* Colombo bk.II (1909) p.11 says) he consulted the priesthood – though this would hardly have been the Buddhist, considering

launch her on the waters (even if now the sea was closer to his doorstep than when he had the holy therā's corpse carried to it (seven gauvas and all !?) for dumping.

A physical explanation of such a phenomenon is that the inundation was not of one single giant wave or a temporary rising of the sea-level (in which case the whole island, not to mention all other lands, would have experienced it) but of a series of waves caused by a series of undersea tremors. My own view however is that while the inundation may have been one wave or many, the prolongation of the flooding was more of mythical necessity than physical probability—though this is not to deny the possibility that it could have been both.

Exactly the same situation is met with in the myth of Andromeda. The sea invades the land and holds on until she is sacrificed. There too there is need of time for King Cepheus to realize that the sea would not retreat on its own, consult the oracle of Ammon, then put out the girl for the sea (monster) to take her. Upon which, as with our anecdote, we presume that the gods were satisfied and stopped the inundation of his Ethiopian realm.

Thus, while the flooding of Kelaniya in the second century B.C. is now more than ever acceptable as a historical fact due to the recent experience, this same experience gives evidence that its prolongation (as in the corresponding Andromeda myth) was probably mythical and with a view to making story based upon it reflecting that of Danae, with which to romanticize a marriage contracted on purely political considerations.

Turning to this mythic material itself, there is noticeable a misguided tendency to heroize Viharadevi, even at this early age (a child of twelve ears?), depicting her as volunteering to die for king and country instead of the terrified victim of a cruel cult being sent to her lonely death. What the anger of the gods demanded was a blood-offering from the king's own family, forcing him to make the sacrifice himself for the crime he committed and his involvement of the sea in it. However, when Musaeus-Higgins¹² presented the idea that the remaining part of King Kelanitissa's kingdom might be saved if the girl would *willingly* sacrifice

the recommendation. Cepheus of the Greek myth was directed by the oracle of Ammon and understandably, forced by the people. This was perhaps how it happened with King Kelanitissa as well. See Ananda W. P. Guruge ed. *Mahavamsa* Colombo (1989) pt. IV Notes. p.873 n.19. "How the launching of the princess was arrived at as a solution to the sea erosion is glossed over apparently as the readership or the audience was presumed to know the full story."

¹² *loc. cit.* See also p. 13 "The Devas were satisfied with her intended self-sacrifice and did not allow the ocean to swallow up this maiden, who was willing to give her life to save her country." Note that Musaeus-Higgins concedes that what the sacrifice would help save was not what was already inundated but *the remaining part of the kingdom!*

herself, and she consented, she was retelling the story for children. The same notion manifests itself afterwards in other works, not the least Sinha Publication's *The Revolt in the Temple*,¹³ where we read that Viharadevi "volunteered to be cast adrift on the sea" in expiation of her father Kelani Tissa's sacrilege".

That such ideas, which have no support in the evidence, are already distorting the tradition is found when serious adaptations like the *Mahavamsaya* of Gunapala Veerasekera¹⁴ assert that Devi, who was King Kelanitissa's daughter, agreed to be a sacrifice to the sea on behalf of her country (*thamage rata venuven muhudata bilivānata kemaththa prakasha kelāya*).

Best evidence that Viharadevi was no willing victim is the fact that, though she was not bound hand and foot like Iphigeneia on the altar at Aulis, she was nevertheless imprisoned in the vessel, itself no boat (*oruwak*, as the *Rajavaliya* calls it) but a *pot* (*Mhv. ukkaliya*; *Sin. Thup., Saddh. sala*), the lid or covering (*piyanpath*) of which had to be torn off from outside, as those who found her did, to release the girl. For in effect she had been as helpless and doomed in it as was Andromeda chained to her crag¹⁵ (or, for that matter, Danae in her wooden chest [*larnax*]).

However be it, it turns out that though (as the *Saddharmalankaraya* says) the gods were intent on destroying both king and kingdom (*me rajū ha samaga mohu ge rājjaya nasamha ye samudraya uthpāthitha kota*)—no matter the kingdom, the king himself did not come off too badly when the daughter he was expected to lose, far from drowning in the ocean waves or being swallowed by a sea-monster, ended up winning him an unhopd-for son-in-law, the powerful Kavantissa.

Once Viharadevi, the mother-to-be of Dutugemunu was launched on the waters of the flood, the *Mahavamsa* had no more interest in King Kelanitissa, or for that matter, Kelaniya. As Paronavitana writes,¹⁶ "We hear no more of Kalyani and its rulers. They were perhaps impressed with Kakavanna's superior resources, and became content, in course of time, to acknowledge the rulers of Mahagama as their overlord".

History may have let our offending king live in peace to a ripe old age. But myth, and karmic retribution for a holy monk's murder, could not suffer him to go unpunished, now that the deities of the sea had had second thoughts about requiting him through the death of his daughter.¹⁷ So what the *Mahavamsa* and

¹³ (Popular ed.) Colombo (1953) p.26.

¹⁴ Colombo (1955) p. 190.

¹⁵ See Solius Mendis' portrayal of the scene at the Kelaniya temple. The vessel is depicted as a boat with a sail, her prison a lobster-pot-like wicker contraption.

¹⁶ *op.cit* p.149.

¹⁷ The girl, as a sacrificial victim, had to be "unsullied" (*suddham*). Geiger mistranslates this as "pious" (see Guruge *op. cit.* p.173 n.17) while G. Turnour (tr. *The Mahavamsa* Colombo

Saddharmalankaraya pass over and the *Sinhala Thupavamsa* threatens (*me rajuth me rajuge ratath galā maramha*) but does not carry out, the *Rajavaliya* takes care of, thus also rounding off our story. For it says that no sooner had King Kelanitissa floated the girl in her vessel on the waters than, leaping upon the back of his royal elephant, he set out to view the flood. Whereupon

. . . the deities of the ocean, sweeping the king off the back of his elephant and enveloping him in water like the flames of Avichi, drew him down to the fundament of the earth, where the waters end, and there he lies (to this day) suffering the tortures of Hell.

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(1889) misreads the texts to mean that her name was Suddhadevi. The *Mahavamsa* says nothing of why the sea-deities did not take their sacrifice— Andromeda, after all, had been forcibly snatched from her fate by Perseus. Those who say that Viharadevi was spared by them due to her singular piety (with a great destiny thrown in — see for instance the *Rajavaliya*) are once again confounding the psychology of these hoary divinities, who demanded satisfaction through human sacrifice.